

History is now

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Abstract

The paper highlights the value of keeping records that will be useful to future historians. These include manuscripts, research records, correspondence, records of phone and personal discussions, personal bibliographies, newspaper items, notices of meetings, advertisements, receipts for accommodation and purchases, photographs of people, buildings and natural sites, and field books.

During this symposium we have heard the fruits of much thorough research into Australia's botanical history. We should, however, ask: what are we doing for those who come after us? Are we keeping adequate records? Brian Morley has discussed some of the needs regarding botanical art. I here address other aspects of keeping historical records.

How many of us have searched fruitlessly for information on a botanist, a collector, an artist, or a locality? We explore all avenues — literature, note books, archives, personal contacts, but that piece of information is just not there, has disappeared like the origin of the angiosperms.

Along the way we have probably unearthed intriguing facts or been lured into side-tracks not always relevant to the immediate objective. Throughout this symposium we have heard of detective work that has solved — or perhaps not solved — a wide range of matters of botanical history and documentation.

Sometimes this work is essential to research, e.g. to determine the application of a name or trace a type locality. At other times it is simply fascinating in its own right — which in no way is to be derided, for interest in history is part of the human make-up. Our presence at this meeting shows that.

I set before you the kinds of records that we should be keeping so that future historians may have an easier task than us. These are mainly of an institutional and personal nature; items such as society newsletters and notices of meetings should be retained by the organization concerned.

Essential records

Correspondence

This is a primary resource for the historian. Most employers, whether government or private industry, maintain a filing system that is relatively easy to use. Files are classified according to subject or staff member, sometimes with a new set each year. Provision should be made for them to be archived when no longer needed in the registry. Private correspondence should also be kept.

I have noticed that some botanists do not file all official correspondence, however, but retain it in their offices. In the case of public servants this is against regulations. The serious drawbacks to this system are

the possibility of loss (especially when the person retires or changes jobs) and inaccessibility to others. Letters do sometimes contain personal matters that need not or should not be filed, but a photocopy of the 'official' text may be retained. The personal bits, of course, could be of great interest to a historian!

Journal and diaries

Many people keep a journal or diary of their main activities, often as a requirement of their employer. These can be most useful for checking events, progress, visitors, receipt of publications, etc.

Manuscripts

Original drafts should be archived. They may be useful, e.g. to check authorship. Retaining them is becoming less feasible, however, as more people compile papers directly on disk. In these cases a first print-out should be kept. In conjunction with the draft, supplementary notes, sketches, literature extracts and other material used to draft a paper can be important since they may contain ideas and comments excluded from the publication.

Records of telephone calls

Much 'correspondence' is now conducted by phone. While the substance of these is often incorporated into a manuscript or other activity, it should also be recorded as a note for the relevant correspondence file. Unfortunately this is often not done, sometimes leading to problems or a follow-up call when the substance or the date cannot be recalled accurately. This is especially critical when other people are involved in the subsequent action. Remember — the call and the record together take less time than formal correspondence. You are still ahead on time!

Computer mail

The sequel to telephone communication is the computer. Messages are now frequently sent by this means but no record is kept. Either a printout or a handwritten note should be filed.

Visitor books

These usually are retained and are an obvious source of information. In addition, the entries are usually

made by visitors themselves and thus might be useful as handwriting samples.

Minutes of meetings

Although there should be an official file copy of these, it will then be somewhat distant from your other personal records. A set placed on a research file will make it easier for the historian to trace personal involvement and contributions. Personal notes taken at meetings (including doodles) should also be kept.

Field books

These are of prime importance and should always be safely stored, with provisions for archiving. We have only to consider how useful it would be to have field books of James Drummond and Ferdinand Mueller to understand their value. There is often only one copy of field books, and supplementary data are often included that do not find their way onto herbarium labels, e.g. other personnel on the expedition, people met, weather, vehicles, comments on the later determinations.

Ensure that field books are legible and intelligible to yourself and others. A speedometer reading with no reference point may be useless! A mud map can be an invaluable in accurately defining an obscure locality.

Personal publications

Many of us are aware how difficult it can be to trace all the published work of an individual. There is little problem with major writings, but those of small circulation or of ephemeral nature (e.g. newsletters, newspapers) are easily overlooked. Here, two courses of action should be maintained: first, a set of all one's publications, and second, an up-to-date bibliography.

Optional records

Staff appointments and departures

Dates are kept with personal files, etc., but it is worth keeping a separate register for ready reference. Few people can recall precise dates of someone joining and leaving the staff.

Other travel records

Transport tickets contain information usually not kept elsewhere — especially schedules and fares — not to overlook the carrier. The Western Australian Herbarium has, for example, books of railway tickets

issued to Charles Gardner in the 1940s. They contain the carbon copy and would be useful to a biographer tracing his movements at that period.

Copies of departmental travel forms contain similar information.

Photographs

These are both informative and of the greatest human interest, often going far beyond a pictorial representation of people and places. Their reproduction in a historical account enhances the work immeasurably.

Special care should be taken with storage. Colour slides and prints often deteriorate with age, and should be checked regularly (if only every few years). Important shots should be duplicated to extend longevity. Black and white film and prints are longer-lasting than colour and cheaper to reproduce.

Newspaper and magazine cuttings

These can be useful for indicating current issues and public interest through news items, feature articles and letters to editors. Poor-quality paper is a long-term storage problem and indexing is difficult, but they should be retained, and posterity can assess the longer-term importance. The simplest storage is articles glued on sheets and stored in punched files in chronological order. Newspapers retain published prints for a short period. The negatives (which include far more photographs than are published) are usually offered to a major library for archiving after this initial period.

Inventories of field equipment

Just as we study lists of equipment taken on early voyages and expeditions, so will future historians wish to know what we take. Very often there is no written record, making it all the more important to keep those that exist. Remember, our vehicles and some equipment will seem quaint in a hundred years' time — though the plant press may be similar. Food lists should be included with this item.

What I have mentioned is the ideal. There are four main problems in maintaining extensive records: the time required, the archival quality of the materials on which they are stores, storage space, and indexing. Each person must assess what should be kept, and how. To a large extent the problems of materials and storage are for those charged with archiving our records after we no longer need them. But we should at least ensure that provision is made for the option to archive. If we do this, then perhaps in the tricentennial year, 2088, the Society will have another memorable symposium!